Bhagavan Ramana and Herbal Medicine

By
Dr Manikkam

"The essence of all beings is earth.
The essence of earth is water.
The essence of water is the herb.
The essence of the herb is the human being."
So says a maxim of the *Chandogya Upanishad.*

The health traditions of India extend to thousands of years. It perhaps started with the cave man who consumed roots, leaves and herbs raw before discovering fire and subsequently the means of cooking. In this, however, man was only imitating the animals which consumed plants to alleviate health disorders. Nature has provided animals with hindsight that helps them recognise symptoms of bodily disorders, the means of self-diagnosis and self-medication. The monkey provides one of the most common and best examples. To this, we shall revert later.

In India, before codified medicinal systems like *Ayurveda* and *Siddha* took roots, folk curative traditions based on observation and experimentation were developed and nurtured. This tradition had its variants in accordance with climate, terrain and habits; but the essence was the same. The plant kingdom was considered the saviour. General health disorders were treated by a combination of various plants and herbs. Each and every part of a plant was useful — root, bark, stem, leaf, flower, fruit and seed. Methods were developed to extract the maximum benefits from each of the parts of a plant.

This glorious tradition which was the forerunner to *Siddha* and *Ayurveda*, was passed through word of mouth to successive generations. The grandmother in the house was the main custodian of this oral tradition. Proverbs were created and repeated any number of times by the elders in the family to emphasise the importance of healthy living, both physical as well as mental. These proverbs have stood the test of time and they remain intact to guide us. The properties and benefits of herbs and plants were enshrined in easy to understand language. All Indian languages had their own variants of these 'health proverbs'.

The most important feature of the ancient Indian systems of medicine is to look at the human being as a whole entity. The physiological part of it was not divorced from the psychological and the psychical. The body, mind and soul were not treated separately, but as constituting a wholesome single entity.

Ancient *puranic* tradition has it that this system was practised by the *rishis, siddhas* and *devas*, the celestial beings. The *siddhas* were seekers after God. It was they who scientifically developed and nurtured various disciplines such as yoga, medicine, linguistics and other allied arts and sciences. Eighteen *siddhas* were famous and Sage Agastya was the first of them.

The Herbal System

The herbal system of medicine contains within itself two streams, both complementary to each other. These are the preventive and the curative. The philosophy of the Indian ancients was that, the body, being the vehicle for the soul, had to be protected and nourished. Diseases had to be first prevented. This can be achieved by following a strict regimen of diet. Fresh vegetables, roots, seeds and fruits play a great role. Seeds, leaves and roots are an essential part of the Indian diet. These form the main ingredients of dishes like *sambhar*, *rasam* and *kootu*, which are the main items of an Indian meal. These items are soups laced with vegetables for nourishment, apart from seeds like cummin, etc. Two things were achieved as a result. One, the body received the essential nourishment; two, the medicinal properties of herbs used in cooking acted as preventive against bodily disorders and diseases.

Each and every vegetable, fruit, seed, root, leaf and stem was found to contain precious medicinal properties capable of not only preventing diseases but curing them too. How did the ancient Indians discover these treasures? Through what means were they able to find out the uses of these plants and herbs? What was the methodology adopted for their research? We cannot say for sure. Being essentially religious and spiritual at the core of their being, the ancient Indians, through keen observation and power of perception, were able to study and discover the properties of the plant kingdom. The ancient Indian worshipped animals and plants. The cow, the elephant and the tiger were all objects of worship. Leaves were used for worshipping the gods. Fruits were offered to the gods as consecration. It was therefore with this worshipful and reverential attitude that the ancient Indian studied and researched the various forms of life including the plant. Observation, intuition and experimentation were the three tools that were used to assemble a vast corpus of knowledge on herbs.

The nature of food intake varies by the season. Herbs which are considered to possess hot properties are avoided during summer but recommended in winter, and vice versa. The melon for example is an essential part of diet during summer but totally avoided in winter. Diet recommendation depends on the constitution of each person. Medicines are developed not only for curing diseases but also for increasing the vitality and strength of the body. From the common cold to stomach ailments, from treatment of a simple injury to complex bone setting, the ancient Indian, taking recourse to plants and herbs, had solutions for them all.

Diagnosis of disease is done by measuring pulse — through which the basic nature of the body, whether gastric, bilious or phlegmatic was determined. Physicians undertake an intricate examination of the pulse and this is the most important of the diagnostic methods. The pulse tells the complete history of a man's health. Diagnosis is also done by examining the tongue, the eyes, colour, speech, and the excretions. The physician has to be conversant with astrology too. The natal horoscope of a man gives indications of his body constitution, health, the diseases he is likely to ancestrally inherit and even the nature of treatment he is likely to respond to. Thus it is a multi-pronged strategy that is followed by Indian indigenous medicine. These then, are the essentials of the ancient Indian system of medicine.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, the Sage of Tiruvannamalai, knew many of the herbal recipes. At his ashram in Tiruvannamalai, the simple diet offered to devotees was itself medicine. Bhagavan was an expert cook himself and he would give detailed instructions to the cooks on proper

seasoning of ingredients, their proportion, the mixture and the proper method of cooking. As in traditional Indian households, inmates of the ashram were required to take periodical oil-baths to keep the body temperature even and the nerves and tissues calm and composed, and periodical purgatives to keep the stomach clean and healthy. Castor-oil and the bitter myrobalan fruit were the two natural ingredients used for the latter. The *rasam* (a watery soup) was prepared in a variety of ways, each day with different ingredients, all of them medicinal leaves, seeds and herbs. Each served different purposes. The *vada narayana* leaf for example, as its first name in Sanskrit suggests, is an antidote for rheumatism. The *kanda tippili* is used for relieving body pain, cold and rheumatism. The *veppam poo* (the neem flower) is good for diabetes and for destroying worms in the body. The *thoodu valai* leaf cures the common cold, excess phlegm and other lung irritants. The bitter gourd vegetable is an excellent antidote for diabetes. All these are both for prevention and cure. These methods are still followed at Sri Ramanasramam.

Bhagavan Ramana was very particular about devotees eating the right kind of food.

Here are two extracts from *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*:

Talk 22

D.: We Europeans are accustomed to a particular diet; change of diet affects health and weakens the mind. Is it not necessary to keep up physical health?

M.: Quite necessary. The weaker the body the stronger the mind grows.

D.: In the absence of our usual diet our health suffers and the mind loses strength.

M.: What do you mean by strength of mind?

D.: The power to eliminate worldly attachment.

M.: The quality of food influences the mind. The mind feeds on the food consumed.

Talk 28

D.: Are there any aids to (1) concentration and (2) casting off distractions?

M.: Physically the digestive and other organs are kept free from irritation. Therefore food is regulated both in quantity and quality. Non-irritants are eaten, avoiding chillies, excess of salt, onions, wine, opium, etc. Avoid constipation, drowsiness and excitement, and all foods which induce them. Mentally take interest in one thing and fix the mind on it. Let such interest be all-absorbing to the exclusion of everything else. This is dispassion (*vairagya*) and concentration. God or *mantra* may be chosen. The mind gains strength to grasp the subtle and merge into it.

Bhagavan also used to prepare or help others prepare medicines for the general well-being and health of devotees. How did he acquire knowledge of these? One cannot say for sure, but it can be surmised that Bhagavan, belonging as he did to a traditional Indian family, was well aware of the

common remedies that his mother and aunts might have prepared at home. Also, after coming to Tiruvannamalai, he would consult books on these subjects. Evidence for this is found in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* and *Day by Day with Bhagavan*:

Talk 357.

When living on the Hill Sri Bhagavan used to help in the *puja* of J. P., ringing the bell, washing the vessels, etc., all along remaining silent. He also used to read medical works, *e.g.*, *Ashtanga Hridayam* in Malayalam and point out the treatment contained in the book for the patients who sought the other *sadhu's* help. That *sadhu* did not himself know how to read these works.

Talk 4.

Maharshi was asked by an educated young man: "How do you say that the Heart is on the right, whereas the biologists have found it to be on the left?" The man asked for authority.

M.: Quite so. The physical organ is on the left, that is not denied. But the Heart of which I speak is non-physical and is only on the right side. It is my experience, no authority is required by me. Still you can find confirmation in a Malayalam *Ayurvedic* book and in *Sita Upanishad*.

Maharshi produced the quotation (*mantra*) from the latter and repeated the text (*sloka*) from the former.

Day by Day with Bhagavan:

G. V. S.: Is it stated in any book that for ultimate and final Self-realization one must ultimately come to the Heart even after reaching *sahasrara,* and that the Heart is at the right side?

Bhagavan: No. I have not come across this in any book. But in a Malayalam book on medicine I came across a stanza locating the heart on the right side and I have translated it into Tamil in the *Supplement to the Forty Verses*. (v. 18.)

The above quotes prove beyond doubt that the ancient Indians not only possessed ample knowledge of medicine, but that they did not limit themselves with physical well being; rather their endeavour extended to integrating the body, mind and spirit. Good physical health was a *sine qua non* to a clear, pure mind; the health of both mind and body was necessary in order to be able to steadfastly pursue the spiritual goal.

It is also important to point out here that the Arunachala hill abounds in medicinal plants and herbs. Practitioners of traditional Indian medicine roam about the slopes of Arunachala in search of herbs. As pointed out earlier, it is interesting to watch monkeys, which are found in hundreds in and around Arunachala, their behaviour and habits. One can watch a big group of monkeys during a particular time in the day on the hill, mostly in the evenings, gather around certain plants and munch the leaves and seeds. The elders of the monkey family would coax the youngsters, sometimes administering a physical rebuke too, into consuming the herbs. Other animals too possess intuitive knowledge about herbs and their uses. This fact is sufficient inducement for man who calls himself superior to other forms of life, to utilise the treasures of nature for his all round well being.

About Myself



Dr. Manickam

I was born at Pavalakkundru in Tiruvannamalai as the last child of my parents. My mother Alamelu and father Venu were both ardent devotees of Sri Bhagavan. When Bhagavan was staying at Pavalakkundru, the place was being managed by a *math*. The head of that *math* introduced my grandfather to Bhagavan. Later it was the same head of that *math* who introduced my father also to Bhagavan. My parents have sat at the Maharshi's feet a number of times to learn from him the secrets of herbs and herbal medicine. The Master would give them detailed instructions on the preparation methods of various medicines which my parents duly and faithfully recorded. Once, during a conversation with Bhagavan, my father told him that the castor plant did not possess enough juice. It was also hard to find the plant in the environs of Tiruvannamalai. Bhagavan then asked my father to go to Athimur on the Javadhu hills, near Polur. There was a lake there and the plant could be sighted on its banks and ample juice could be extracted. My father went to Athimur, and found the plant at the exact location mentioned by Bhagavan.

Following the footsteps of my parents, I am also deeply devoted to Bhagavan. I pray for his grace always and I have no doubt in my mind that it is he who is guiding me in my profession. I scrupulously follow Bhagavan's recipes and formulas of herbal medicines and use them for treatment of patients. By Bhagavan's grace, I have been able to cure patients who come to me for treatment. It may not be superfluous to mention that Bhagavan's medicinal recipes are perfect and eminently curative. The credit therefore goes to the master. I consider myself only as an instrument in his hands. It is also a matter of great satisfaction for me that many of Bhagavan's devotees consult me on their health. This is what gives me soul-fulfilment. I have also made it a point to give free treatment to the poor who cannot afford the costs of treatment and medicine. I am happy to share with the world some of the herbal medicinal recipes of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi.

1/ Saraswatha Churnam

Ingredients required: dry ginger, liquorice, rock salt, the long pippali, cumin seeds, turmeric, barberry, calamus root, saussurea, omum. — All these should be bought in equal measure.

Preparation: All the above ingredients should be carefully ground, made into fine powder and mixed together. Take a teaspoon of ghee (clarified butter) and a half teaspoon of the powdered mixture and mix thoroughly. Consume twice a day.

Parts of herbs used in the above: roots, seeds and salt.

Body parts for which the above is used: Brain and nerves.

How does it act?: Soothes nerves, restores calmness to an agitated brain and mind, acts on tissues, restores vitality.

What are the symptoms and indications that will necessitate the use of the above medicine?: Loss of memory, sluggish brain, insomnia, weak muscles and tissues.

Precautions: None, there are no side-effects.

2/ Ashta Churnam:

Bhagavan Ramana's recipe for this particular medicine is different from the traditional practice; and herein lies Bhagavan's speciality. In most traditional recipes, the physician follows a set pattern. All ingredients are taken in equal measure. Bhagavan also follows this method in some of his recipes. But mostly, he differs from the common physician in this aspect. Each ingredient is proportionately selected and mixed, depending upon the strength and properties of the ingredient. This is the essential difference between Bhagavan's recipes and those traditionally followed by physicians. Bhagavan's formulations are more potent and effective. Another great advantage is that these recipes are the handiwork of the Supreme Jnani and therefore the physical, mental and spiritual results of these recipes are manifold and invaluable.

Ingredients:

Black pepper - 9 parts,
Dry ginger - 7 parts
the bigger Cummin Seed — 5 parts
Rock Salt — 5 parts
Long Pippali — 5 parts
Cummin Seed — 3 parts
Omum — 2 parts

Clean all the above ingredients well and convert them into fine powder. Rice should be well cooked and mixed with ghee. Take a spoon of the above churnam and mix it well with the rice and consume. The above prescription cures indigestion, poor appetite, stomach-ache and is also good for rheumatism.

3/ Agnimukha Churnam

Calamus root — 1 part
Long Pippali — 2 parts
Dry Ginger — 3 parts
Omum — 4 parts
Myrobalan fruit — 5 parts
Saussurea — 6 parts
Kodiveli — 7 parts

Convert these above into fine powder and mix them well. When necessary take between 1 to 3 grammes of the powder, mix well with hot water and consume.

This formulation cures indigestion, gastric problems and drives away excess heat in the body.

4/ Vaiswanara Churnam

Rock Salt — 1 part
Omum — 2 parts
Cummin seed — 3 parts
Long Pippali — 4 parts
Dry Ginger — 5 parts
Outer shell of the Myrobalan fruit — 6 parts

Convert these above into fine powder, and mix them well. When necessary take between 1 to 3 grams of this powder, mix it with either water or buttermilk and consume. Take thrice daily. This prescription cures stomach problems like a dull stomach-ache, burning sensation in the stomach, etc.

5/ Aswagandhi Churnam

Clove — 10 grammes
Sirunagappu — 20 grammes
Cardamom — 40 grammes
Black Pepper — 80 grammes
Rice Pippali — 160 grammes
Dry Ginger — 320 grammes
Withania — 640 grammes
Sugar Candy — 1280 grammes

One can easily see that the quantity of the ingredients increases by multiples of two. This is again a speciality of Bhagavan Ramana. In ancient medicinal books the prescription for this particular recipe does not contain as many ingredients and certainly not their proportionate increase.

Clean the ingredients well, powder them and mix them well. This is a medicine for general vitality, strength and vigour. It is also reputed to cure many diseases, even complicated ones. I, for a good part of my practice, prescribe the above medicine and have found that it gives excellent results. This one formulation has earned for me a good name in the profession and with my patients.

6/ If one is suffering from piles, the following simple recipe will cure the disease:

Eat a ripe banana along with a teaspoon of cummin seeds regularly. This will cure the disease in a few weeks.

The above recipe was given by Bhagavan to a *yogi* from Karnataka who was suffering from piles and who approached Bhagavan for help. This information was given by Bhagavan himself to my father.

7/ Pittahari

Ghee — 5 parts
Cummin Powder — 5 parts
Sugar — 5 parts
Ginger — 1 part

Grind the ginger well and mix all the ingredients. Heat the mixture. Mix the juice of seven lemons, heat further until sufficiently hot. Consume one teaspoon of this twice a day. This recipe cures indigestion and excess bile caused by the dysfunction of the liver.

8/ Two recipes for rheumatism

a) Take juice of Tulasi leaf (the Basil leaf) and mix a little of pepper powder and ghee in it. Regular intake of this liquid will cure rheumatism.

b) Take garlic and jaggery (what is called brown-sugar) and grind them, mix with sesame-oil and make a good paste of these. Regular intake of this paste will cure rheumatism.

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